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Guerilla Intellectualism: Walter A. Rodney and the Weapon of Knowledge in the Struggle for Black Liberation

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Introduction

The Guinean revolutionary scholar, Amilcar Cabral, described the distinguishing characteristic of imperialism as “the denial of the historical process of the dominated people...”¹ Cabral’s poignant assertion captures a reality that defined the relationship between Europe and Africa from the very dawn of history. It was not until the decade of the 1970s that African and Africanist scholars began sustained intellectual counter-attacks. Europeans used history as a weapon of imposing, sustaining, and legitimizing their hegemony over Africans and peoples of African descent abroad. European scholars denied the existence of civilization in Africa, while depicting Europe as the cradle of civilization. Africa was the “dark continent” of barbarism and heathenism; a static, ahistorical environment, until the arrival of the first Europeans. Though European scholars would later acknowledge the historical heritage of Africa they, however, portrayed that heritage, in all its ramifications, as essentially negative and evil in character. Africa, Europeans scholars contend, made no significant contributions to human development.² Renowned Oxford historian Hugh Trevor Roper captured the European mind-set in his epic response to a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) interview question on the necessity for African history. Rebutting angrily, Roper declared that there was nothing historical in pre-European Africa. What existed was, “the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes on picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe.”³

European rejection and caricaturing of Africa, which predated Roper, was meant to legitimize Europe's impending rape and denouement of the continent. The alleged backward and primitive character of pre-European Africa justified the enslavement and sale of Africans across the Atlantic. When Africans arrived in the new world, Europeans again invoked history as a weapon of mental and psychological domination. Throughout the enslavement and plantation experience, history was used to keep blacks in subordination. When the Europeans finally abandoned slavery and embarked upon what some have called "the second great enslavement," that is, colonialism, history again became a prized weapon of justifying and strengthening European rule. Indeed, History became part of a broader academic culture designed to facilitate European control and domination of non-Europeans. Knowledge was carefully structured, and access to it strictly controlled, all in a bid to strengthen European hegemony. Knowledge became a veritable weapon for creating and nurturing in Africans and blacks in diaspora a mental and psychological disposition to acknowledge white superiority. European hegemony would then appear given, and historically inevitable. A distinctive feature of colonial historiography, especially in its coverage of Africa, was the denial and denigration of the history and culture of Africans. Europeans, J. Blaut argues, perceived the world through the prism of Eurocentric diffusionism. Europe was the civilized center of the universe, and non-Europeans were the peripheral recipient of superior European values and influences.⁴ The use of history as a control mechanism, and the attempt to circumscribe and stunt the epistemological horizon of Africans/blacks continued well into the colonial era. British and European scholars portrayed colonialism as a civilizing force, designed to bring Africans into the orbit of civilization and history. Put differently, colonialism entailed the extension to Africans of the benefits and values of superior European civilization and history.⁵ Few have been fooled by this attempt to obscure the true character of imperialism. The reasons Europeans marshaled and utilized the weapon of history, during both slavery and colonialism, included, *inter alia*, the desire to destroy the self-esteem of Africans; to deny them positive self-conception, and pride in their historical heritage; to rid them of any consciousness that would have rendered them resistant to enslavement and colonialism. Challenging and reversing this epistemological ethnocentrism, this usurpation and abnegation of the historical traditions of Africans became, for Cabral, prerequisite for national liberation. Freedom from colonial domination and exploitation was, in Cabral's judgement, inconceivable without sound knowledge of the historical reality.⁶ He affirmed "the inalienable right of every people to have its own history."⁷ Recon-

structuring African history from an anti-imperialist perspective, therefore, became the focus of liberation ethics.

The explosions of anti-colonial sentiments and movements in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Africa, and the rise of militant black nationalism among blacks in the diaspora, led to demands for a countervailing historiography; one that would both challenge and invalidate the dominant racist and paternalistic assumptions about Africa. This, in effect, was a call for a revolutionary epistemological paradigm that would radically undo the dangers done to black and African consciousness by Eurocentric historiography. Africans and blacks in the United States and the Caribbean seriously took up researching and studying African history and culture. Determined to wrest control of interpretations of African and black history from the hands of Europeans, these scholars began to challenge the claims and contentions of Eurocentric historiography; claims that sustained European hegemony for centuries. They were driven by the challenges of both debunking the myths and misconceptions of Eurocentric historiography, and mobilizing and arming Africans with positive self-esteem. They sought to infuse Africans with a new outlook and consciousness that would make them both question and reject the self-abnegating and denigrating *weltanschauung* that had oppressed them for centuries and become actively involved in the task of liberation from European domination and exploitation. The result was the development of a genre of revolutionary historical scholarship. In challenging Eurocentric historiography, black scholars equally invoked history as a weapon of generating a new revolutionary consciousness. One scholar who helped to define and shape the contours of this revolutionary consciousness, this new and combative historiography, was Walter Anthony Rodney (1942-1980).

Rodneyan Materialism: Origins, Development, and Application

Rodney was born into a working class family in Georgetown, Guyana, on the 23rd of March 1942. His father was a tailor and an independent artisan, and his mother a housewife and part-time seamstress. In the world of the Rodneys, one's racial background shaped one's life experiences, and determined one's economic and social stations in life. It was a world that confined blacks to the lowest wrung of the social, economic, and political ladders of society. In comparison to black marginalization and impoverishment, whites enjoyed affluence and privileges. Indeed, Rodney was born into a society where those who were oppressed and deprived had very few avenues of escape and redress.⁸ For most blacks, however, education seemed to provide the only avenue of escape from the

dungeon of misery and deprivation. Unfortunately, the expectations of those fortunate to acquire education were soon shattered as they quickly discovered that, "there is not much room at the top to accommodate them."⁹ Guyana had little room for the upwardly mobile blacks. Many, therefore, turned overseas—to the United States, Canada, and Britain—where their skills were in greater demand. Education consequently became, according to Rodney, a "conduit that led out of society," transplanting many blacks into "the wider capitalist world."¹⁰ Rodney was among the fortunate to gain access to education. He entered the University of the West Indies (UWI) at Mona in 1960 to study history. He graduated in 1963 with a first class honors degree, and won a UWI scholarship to pursue post-graduate Studies in African History at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), the University of London.

There is no doubt that Rodney's pursuit of African History was motivated partly by the urge to confront the pervasive and domineering Eurocentric historiography, and partly by a longing, as with many blacks in the United States, to investigate the roots and realities of the African and black historical experiences. Rodney was thus drawn to research the African past by a determination to help in reversing the damages to the African and black historical consciousness that European interpretations and constructions of the African past had accomplished. As he contended, "the white man has already implanted numerous myths in the minds of black people; and those have to be uprooted, since they can act as a drag on revolutionary action."¹¹ He offered a sound knowledge of African history as a prerequisite for any meaningful and effective confrontation with Eurocentric historiography and worldview, and emphasized the imperative of using historical knowledge to rescue blacks from the cultural domination of imperialism. In his words, African history became a weapon for rejecting and combating what he termed, "European cultural egocentricity."¹² Attending the University of London, however, compelled Rodney to confront and explain the anomaly of studying and researching the African historical experience under the tutelage of some of the leading European historians whose writings had contributed to justifying and sustaining European hegemony. In other words, he found himself in an intellectual milieu controlled by some of the leading European scholars of the epoch, those whose writings had fostered several of the misconceptions of the African cultural and historical experience that he sought to overturn. He provided two critical rationalizations of his awkward context. First, he deemed it the responsibility of any aspiring critical scholar to engage seriously the writings and thoughts of other scholars, even those with whom he disagrees ideologically. It is only by immersing oneself in the thoughts and

convictions of other scholars that one is equipped intellectually to understand them and be in position to debunk their contentions effectively.¹³ Second, from the critical perspective of a graduate student, Rodney stressed the importance of adhering to, and satisfying, whatever academic standards were established as requirements for the degree/program he was pursuing, regardless of his misgivings about those standards. Failure to satisfy and adhere to those standards would, he averred, erode the force and conviction of his future intellectual postulations.¹⁴ In Rodney's view, therefore, it is by legitimizing oneself first within the standards of academic excellence recognized in one's discipline that one can more effectively, authoritatively, and creditably take on those within the discipline/field whose ideas one disagrees with.

Rodney, however, quickly realized that challenging Eurocentric historiography would not be an easy task given the control that Europeans exercised over the nature and dissemination of knowledge. Though difficult, he believed that the task was not impossible. To be successful in this endeavor, however, the black intellectual must become a guerilla. Rodney consequently introduced the concept of "Guerilla intellectual" (GI) to underscore what he termed "the initial imbalance in power in the context of academic learning" between blacks and whites.¹⁵ The "underpinnings" of all aspects of education were controlled and manipulated by whites—books, reference materials, and theoretical assumptions.¹⁶ Given this disparity, the black intellectual had no choice but to adopt guerilla tactics. Rodney urged black intellectuals to embrace the "first and major struggle," that is, the struggle over ideas, by using their positions within the academy to challenge Eurocentric ideas.¹⁷ Furthermore, as a product of bourgeois environment, the GI must first free himself from the entrapment of bourgeois culture; indeed from the "Babylonian captivity" of bourgeois society.¹⁸ Rodney suggested three ways of accomplishing this freedom. First, the GI should vigorously attack those distorted ideas within his discipline that are used to legitimize European domination and hegemony. Second, the GI should transcend his disciplinary focus and challenge the dominant social myths in society, particularly those that are used to mask the ugly realities of society. Third, the GI should fully commit himself to the masses by getting closer to, and grounding with them, gaining useful insights into the true character of society and culture and, in the process, undergoing what Cabral called "A spiritual reconversion of mentalities," indeed a "re-Africanization" process that is a prerequisite for liberation.¹⁹ Accomplishing these three functions became, for Rodney, the litmus test for ascertaining the depth of the intellectual's commitment to the interests and redemption of the people. In other words, the GI must create a linkage between the theoretical

underpinnings of his convictions and the practical realities of the experiences of the masses; he must become a part of their experience, by actively partaking of that experience. Rodney firmly believed that unless, and until, a black intellectual is willing and able to effect this kind of transcendence, he remains in the class of enemies of the people. As he declared, "all of us are enemies to the people until we prove otherwise."²⁰

Determined not to be faulted in any way or form, and seeking informed knowledge of the underpinnings of what he derisively tagged "bourgeois scholarships," Rodney devoured whatever bourgeois literatures and theories were presented to him in graduate school. He worked diligently to satisfy the defined academic standards for his program, earning the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree in 1966 with a dissertation on "A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800." Almost immediately, Rodney gave clear indication that he intended his scholarship specifically for uprooting the edifices of Eurocentric historiography and empowering the black masses in Africa and abroad. Essentially, his researches and publications would unearth the true nature of African history and heritage. Most critically, he would focus on identifying and exposing the nature and sources of the problems bedeviling Africans and blacks in diaspora. He would address such questions as: who has been, and still is, responsible for African/black subordination and exploitation? What is the *modus operandi* of imperialism? What strategies would best guarantee a speedy liberation of blacks? Rodney's preoccupation with redeeming the African historical experience and developing a combative countervailing African historiography led him even deeper into broadening his knowledge of, and familiarity with, Africa and Africans. He relocated to Tanzania shortly after completing his Ph.D., to assume the position of Lecturer in the Department of History of the University of Dar-es-Salaam. His stay in Tanzania was, however, brief. Barely a year after he began teaching there, Rodney accepted the offer of a position of Lecturer in the Department of History at the Mona campus of UWI, his alma mater. Almost immediately upon arrival in Mona, Rodney began to engage in activities beyond his professorial calling. He began to frequent the "dungles" and "rubbish dungs" of Kingston, to meet and ground with the ordinary people.²¹ As Pierre-Michel Fontaine contends, Rodney's objective was to free these people "of the self-abasing and self-defeating attitudes fostered by centuries of colonialism followed by a thriving neo-colonial era."²² His actions proved threatening to the Jamaican government and, in October of 1968, while attending a Congress of Black Writers in Montreal, Canada, Rodney was barred from returning to Jamaica. He returned to his old job in Tanzania in 1968.²³

This return marked the beginning of a productive intellectual career.

Rodney utilized Marxist methodology to dissect and expose the excesses of European imperialism in Africa. He ascribed his Marxist orientation to the influence of C.L.R. James, whose book, *The Black Jacobins*, remains perhaps the best available and perhaps the most exhaustive examination of the revolution that overthrew French plantocracy in Haiti; or in the words of one scholar, "The most compelling account of this pivotal moment in the history of New World slavery."²⁴ While pursuing graduate studies in London, Rodney joined a study group that met periodically in James's home to read and critique Marxist literatures. According to Rodney, the meetings afforded him the opportunity "to acquire a knowledge of Marxism, a more precise understanding of the Russian revolution, and of historical formulation." He also gained "a certain sense of historical analysis."²⁵ Knowledge of Marxism consequently armed Rodney with a platform for constructing a revolutionary ideology. He, however, refused to acknowledge Marxism as an ideology uniquely fitted for a European context, emphasizing instead its flexibility and susceptibility to domestication and adaptation. The materialist interpretation of history inherited a critique of imperialism and capitalism that was adaptable to different geographical and cultural contexts. Marxism thus acquired relevance to the African situation, especially since Africa had become fully incorporated into the global capitalist system.²⁶ Knowledge and understanding of the inner workings of capitalism became fundamental to its overthrow, and Marxism became the tool for disseminating this knowledge. Consequently, Rodney commended Cabral's efforts in merging the epistemological and revolutionary dimensions of Marxism and in adapting the ideology to the situation in Guinea Bissau. Cabral, in Rodney's judgement, had ensured that, "Marxism does not simply appear as the summation of other people's history, but appears as a living force with one's history."²⁷

In Tanzania, Rodney preoccupied himself with critical examinations of aspects of ancient and contemporary African history and political economy. He chose slavery as one subject that required critical reassessment. This focus on slavery underscored his determination to contribute his perspective on a subject that, up to that time, European scholars had enjoyed a monopoly of interpreting. Drawing upon his doctoral study of the Upper Guinea Coast, Rodney began systematically to challenge established contentions on the nature of slavery in traditional African societies and, in the process, questioned the works of some of his teachers at SOAS, most notably J.D. Fage, whom he subsequently engaged in a heated debate on the origins and nature of slavery in Africa.²⁸ Although Rodney acknowledged and lamented both the participation of Africans in the slave trade and the existence of relationships of subordination and

exploitation among Africans prior to the coming of the Europeans, he insisted, however, that slavery, in its trans-Atlantic character, was alien to Africa; introduced to African societies via the Atlantic trade and subsequently corrupted elements of indigenous African institutions and values. Rodney also drew a direct correlation between slavery and the beginning of the underdevelopment of Africa. In his words, "underdeveloping tendencies can uniquely be identified with slavery."²⁹

Rodney contended that since African history had been used as a weapon of domination, keeping Africans at home and blacks in diaspora, ignorant of the glories of their past, and obscuring their true identity, it was the responsibility of black intellectuals to reverse this trend through critical researches into African history and culture. The result would illuminate the antiquity and wealth of civilization in Africa, and reverse the psychological effect of Eurocentric propaganda. It would thus empower blacks, while creating a strong base for unity between Africa and her descendants abroad.³⁰ His publications highlighted the antiquity of civilization in Africa. He stressed the wealth and accomplishments of ancient and classical African civilizations and the superiority of African moral and ethical values. However, knowledge of African history was not an end in itself.³¹ Thought relevant, such knowledge was secondary to the primary task of devising strategies and tactics for black liberation. Rodney thus rejected the doctrine of "knowledge for knowledge sake."³² Knowledge is useful only to the degree that it is used to advance the cause of liberation. It is the ability and willingness to use knowledge to advance the cause of freedom that distinguishes a GI from an armchair philosopher. Consequently, exposing the myths of Eurocentric historiography in the academy is just the beginning of the struggle for the GI. The next and vital phase is the assumption of a position in the vanguard of the people's struggle.

Rodney's call to black intellectuals to transcend arm-chair philosophizing and become activists in behalf of the peoples' cause should not be construed to suggest that he envisioned every educated black person as a potential revolutionary. In fact, he did not expect every educated black to engage the ordinary people in a serious dialogue aimed at undermining the power structure. He knew that, for many blacks, education served as a conduit, an escape valve out of lower class status; a kind of transcendental force that not only relieved many of their lowly status, but also, and most critically, separated them from the plight of the masses. By thus distancing themselves from the plight of the masses, however, they became, in Rodney's judgement, accomplices in the perpetuation of domination and exploitation.³³ It is this conception and utilization of education as an escape valve that was most troubling to

Rodney. It amounted to a misuse of education, a shirking of the immense responsibility that education entailed. Rather than serve as a conduit out of mass society and its problems, Rodney insisted on using education as a tool for deeper immersion in the painful experiences of the masses; an experience that should eventuate in a united front against the perpetrators of the miseries of the people.

Since Europeans determined both the curricula and philosophy of education, Eurocentric education, therefore, constituted an arm of the white power structure, designed to produce acquiescent blacks who would support and defend mainstream Eurocentric values; values that legitimize black subordination.³⁴ Rodney discerned something seductive in the type of education that was available to Africans and West Indians. Its ultimate objective was to nurture self-denigrating and self-abnegating consciousness and, in the process, coopt black intellectuals as appendages and apologists of the white power structure. They became what he called “white-hearted blacks,” willing collaborators in propping up the neo-colonial state.³⁵ What Rodney discerned as the debilitating consequence of Eurocentric education in Africa and the West Indies was precisely what Carter G. Woodson had earlier diagnosed among black American intellectuals. In his seminal study, *The Miseducation of the Negro*, Woodson discussed how the white establishment had used education to create a pliant and culturally sterile black middle class whose behaviors reinforce, rather than challenge, or undermine, the oppressive power structures. The locking of the mind of the “educated Negro” by the educational system, according to Woodson, solidified the mechanism of control and exploitation.³⁶ Just as Woodson had underscored the imperative of confronting this class, Rodney implored the GI to deal with the problem of the “white-hearted blacks” in Africa and the diaspora. Here Rodney echoes yet another of Cabral’s concerns; what he tagged, “the struggle against our own weaknesses.”³⁷ The contradiction evident in Africans conniving with foreigners in the exploitation and oppression of their own people created, in Cabral’s view, a theater of “battle against ourselves” that needed to be fought, regardless of “what the external enemy has done.”³⁸ Cabral thus underlined the imperative of confronting the internal enemies.

Rodney thus emphasized the critical role of education in the black struggle. He offered education as the medium for the mental emancipation of blacks, and the elevation of their social consciousness, as they acquired knowledge of the wealth of ancient African civilization and history. The knowledge thus acquired would constitute the foundation for developing what he called “concrete tactics and strategy necessary” for black liberation.³⁹ He enjoined black intellectuals to reevaluate

themselves and redefine the world from “our own standpoint.”⁴⁰ One discerns strong elements of the Afrocentric genre in Rodney’s thought—redefining black history from a black perspective, as a countervailing pedagogy in the struggles against Eurocentric scholarship and education. Rodney, in essence, enjoined the African and West Indian intelligentsia to choose between the people and the exploitative state. Choosing to serve the masses implied a commitment to the destruction of the exploitative state. Education became a means to black empowerment, and the GI’s role is to use his privileged intellectual resources for reevaluating and redefining the world from a black perspective. Cautioning against establishing “false distinctions between reflection and action,” Rodney admonished the GI to merge theory with praxis, and unify consciousness with action.⁴¹ This fusion of reflection and action would guarantee success in the liberation struggle. He thus laid out a landscape of struggle that transcended intellectual posturing. It is just not enough to write about, and reinterpret, the black experience from a black perspective. The black intellectual has to translate his reflections and critical consciousness into concrete actions designed to attain national liberation. The intellectual or the petit bourgeoisie, to use Cabral’s favorite appellation, has to rally the people against the system and values that had nurtured his own consciousness. Rodney’s admonition to the black intellectual to jettison the false distinction between reflections and action is fundamentally different from similar admonitions by modern Afrocentric scholars. Rodney’s distinction was clear and unambiguous. He successfully tied the conceptual dimension of his struggle to the praxis, affirming that he was not just another revolutionary theoretician. His faith in the potency of the ideas he preached led him to champion the revolutionary application of those ideas. His message was clear and simple—the black intellectual should never maintain a purely philosophical posture, however critical the perspective; but should endeavor to tie consciousness and reflection to “our immediate goal,” which is “the conquest of power.”⁴²

Rodney’s study of imperialism in Africa was perhaps the most combative of his scholarship. Utilizing a Marxist philosophical paradigm, Rodney offered a scathing indictment of European activities in Africa. He wrote his **magnum opus**, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, according to him, not for an academic audience, but specifically for the common people, those who, in his judgement, deserved to have knowledge of the true character of European imperialism and its impacts on the daily lives of Africans. As he acknowledged, the book was prompted by “concern with the contemporary African situation.... In search for an understanding of what is now called ‘underdevelopment’ in

Africa.... The phenomenon of neo-colonialism cries out for extensive investigation in order to formulate the strategy and tactics of African emancipation and development."⁴³ With hindsight, it seems plausible to suggest that he intended this book as a stepping stone into the consciousness and world of the underclass of African and black diasporan societies. In *How Europe...*, Rodney located the roots of African and black underdevelopment and dependency in the two major encounters with Europe—slavery and colonialism. Both encounters were marked by hemorrhages of African manpower and economic resources for the development of Europe, and the rapid and systematic underdevelopment of Africa. Prior to both encounters, Rodney demonstrated that Africa was economically and culturally wealthy, with politically viable and stable states and empires.⁴⁴

Although a Marxist, Rodney acknowledged the racial underpinnings of black-white relationship. Whites have historically monopolized political power and economic resources, while blacks have had to contend with poverty and powerlessness. He observed a correlation between color and power in the imperialist world. As he put it, "We need to look carefully at the nature of the relationships between color and power.... There are two basic sections in the imperialist world—one that is dominated and one that is dominant. Every country in the dominant metropolitan area has a large majority of whites—U.S.A., Britain, France, etc. Every country in the dominated colonial areas has an overwhelming majority of non-whites, as in most of Asia, Africa, and the West Indies. Power therefore, resides in the white countries and is exercised over blacks."⁴⁵ The colonial era graphically illustrated the relationship of domination and exploitation. Colonialism, in Rodney's analysis, wrought unmitigated havoc on the African economy, leaving desolation in its wake.⁴⁶ In thus situating Africa's underdevelopment squarely within Europe's imperial expansion, Rodney amplified a theme expanded upon earlier by fellow West Indian, Eric Williams, in his classic study *Capitalism and Slavery*.⁴⁷ Rodney's ideas also bore the imprints of Cabral's revolutionary philosophy. He greatly admired Cabral, and read his works, from which he quoted copiously in his own publications. In fact, Rodney's critique of European imperialism and analysis of the contradictions of neo-colonialism reflected much of the core elements of Cabralian materialism. Rodney also shared Cabral's conception of the role of history and culture in the liberation struggle. Cabral identified culture as the foundation for building a successful liberation struggle. Culture, Cabral argued, "plunges its roots into the humus of the material reality of the environment in which it develops, and it reflects the organic nature of the society—History enables us to know the nature and extent of the

imbalances and the conflicts (economic, political, social) that characterizes the evolution of society. Culture enables us to know what dynamic synthesis have been formed and set by social awareness in order to resolve these conflicts at each stage of evolution of that society.⁴⁸ Accurate knowledge of history and culture, therefore, became for Cabral *sin qua non* for liberation. As he maintained, "It is with the cultural factor that we find the germ of challenge which leads to the structuring and developing of the liberation movement."⁴⁹

Cabralian materialism depicts the black intellectual as a product of imperialist cultural transformation, a condition that needed to be reversed. Reversal was possible, however, only if the intellectual returned to the masses and acquired better understanding and appreciation of original culture.⁵⁰ This commission of class suicide, which Cabral prioritized, entailed the cultural re-education of the intellectual. As he emphasized, "a people who free themselves from foreign domination will not be culturally free unless...they return to the upward paths of their own culture. The latter is nourished by the living reality of the environment and rejects harmful influences as well as any kind of subjection to foreign cultures."⁵¹ National liberation became, in Cabral's thought, "an act of culture."⁵² Consequently, the intellectual, who must commit class suicide, is searching for reeducation in the native "mass character, the popular character of culture."⁵³ The search would result in a "spiritual reconversion of mentalities."⁵⁴ Liberation from imperialism and neo-colonialism was, therefore, inconceivable unless, and until, the black intellectual committed class suicide by trading his privileged, petty bourgeois status for spearheading the cause of the common people. Cabral thus gave the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie a choice, indeed a Hobsonian one— "to strengthen its revolutionary consciousness, to reject the temptation of becoming more bourgeois and the natural concern of its mentality, to identify itself with the working people...[and]...be capable of committing class suicide."⁵⁵

Concomitant with challenging Eurocentric historiography, Rodney focused his writings on the emerging crisis of African political and economic development, particularly what he perceived as the complicity of African leaders in perpetuating, rather than alleviating, the miseries of their people.⁵⁶ Rodney underlined two critical dimensions to imperialism—economic and political. The economic aspect entailed the mechanism of unequal exchange that imperialism fostered—the exploitation of colonial economic and manpower resources for the production of profits that are then repatriated overseas to lubricate the engines of development in Europe, while leaving the colonies impoverished. The political side mirrored the nature and character of neo-colonialism—the nurtur-

ing of compliant domestic political leaders in Africa entrusted with the task of maintaining intact the dependent character of their respective neo-colonial states. Rodney's Marxist convictions led him to identify class as the dynamic factor in the contradictions he observed in Africa. By the 1970s, he discerned a certain complexity and ambiguity in the crisis of underdevelopment in Africa. The class interests of African political leaders tied them to the apron string of European powers with whom they cooperated in further exploiting and impoverishing the masses and, in consequence, rendering the traditional Europe vs. Africa/white vs. black spectrum superfluous. With the demise of colonialism in Africa, and the assumption of power by indigenous African leaders, it was no longer appropriate, in Rodney's judgement, to accuse the Europeans of sole responsibility for the problems of African and black underdevelopment. With political independence, "the struggle of the African people has intensified rather than abated, and that it is being expressed not merely as a contradiction between African producers and European capitalists but also as a conflict between the majority of the black working masses and a small African possessing class."⁵⁷ Consequently, though in his writings on colonialism/imperialism Rodney had identified race as a paradigm for constructing critical black consciousness, his conception of the relevance of race changed significantly as he analyzed neo-colonialism and tried to shape, in Africans and black diasporans, what he called an "anti-neocolonial consciousness." Race, consequently, lost its appeal and significance in Rodney's writings on neo-colonialism and the political economy of Africa. He cautioned blacks against what he characterized as the "grand singular" consciousness; that is, the perception of reality in black-against-white terms, identifying all whites as the enemies, as if all blacks were friends.⁵⁸ Rodney consequently criticized the nationalists' viewpoint and its projection of race as an absolute category, foreclosing and rejecting any alliances/cooperation with whites.⁵⁹ He published and lectured extensively on the crisis of African underdevelopment and the contradiction inherent in the neo-colonial relationship, while underscoring the global trajectories of neo-colonialism.⁶⁰ His publications fall within the tradition of a burgeoning genre of Marxist interpretations of imperialism and neo-colonialism that many of his contemporaries, and later generations of radical intellectuals, utilized to unravel the problems of development and underdevelopment in Latin America, South and Central America, Africa, and the Caribbean.⁶¹

Rodney grew dissatisfied with arm-chair/ivory tower philosophizing. He became convinced that mere academic debates and theorizing were ineffective against so formidable a force as neo-colonialism—a force

now deeply entrenched in many African countries, sustained and protected by indigenous leaders, who have become among the most exploitative of their respective societies. Political independence had not led to the complete liberation of Africans. Instead of freedom and opportunities, Africans simply exchanged one set of oppressors/exploiters (Europeans) for another (indigenous African leaders). African political leaders have become partners of imperialist interests actively engaged in perpetuating the sufferings of their people. As one African social critic put it, these leaders have become "programmed either to be willing collaborators of imperialism in the impoverishment of their people and the development of of their people's underdevelopment, or at best to be so scared of the awesome reprisals threatened by the imperialists as to be unable to defend their people's rights and interests against imperialism."⁶² Determined to expose these indigenous lackeys, Rodney began to focus more attention on the nature of, and challenges posed by, Africa's neo-colonial dependent status. For Rodney, neo-colonialism constituted a new and critical phase of the struggle.⁶³

Rodney's unraveling of neo-colonialism and its indigenous character illuminated the changing character of race in the black liberation struggle. The application of Marxist methodology enabled him to move beyond the narrow confines of race, which had become the anchor of the burgeoning black nationalist and Pan-Africanist consciousness. Although Rodney acknowledged the centrality of race to both colonialism and the anti-colonial struggles, he affirmed its declining significance in the neo-colonial phase. Rodney was by no means suggesting that racism was dead, but that it had become less useful, as a unifying construct, in the neo-colonial phase, given the complicity of indigenous Africans in the exploitation and dehumanization of the masses. He deemed it imperative to subject Pan-Africanism to periodic reassessment and adjustment, refusing to conceive of the movement as an abstract and unchanging phenomenon. Adjustment was necessary both in terms of its focus and ideological character. In essence, Rodney seems to be suggesting that, "In each succeeding epoch...Pan-Africanism can never simply be assumed as self-evident, since it has to be constantly restated on the basis of real changing 'possibilities' of struggle that arises from constantly changing historical conditions."⁶⁴ The elevation of race by many Pan-Africanists obscured, in Rodney's judgement, the indigenous character and sources of the problems confronting Africans, thereby making it difficult to devise and achieve viable and comprehensive solutions. Africans and blacks in the Caribbean, and in the entire diaspora, were no longer up against Europeans and Americans only, the list of the enemy now included their own kind. This focus on developing and

strengthening anti-neo-colonial consciousness became the defining essence of the Rodneyan Pan-African paradigm, introducing a revolutionary and disturbing (from the point of view of radical black cultural nationalists in Africa and abroad) element to Pan-Africanism. Rodney advocated a reconceptualization of Pan-Africanism, jettisoning the “grand singular” framework and its emphasis on race in favor of a class perspective that illuminated the “particular” problems inherent in the class contradictions of society.⁶⁵ He characterized the “neutrality and unity of nationalism” (based upon race) as illusory; contending that beneath the facade of unity lurked “particular classes or strata [that] capture nationalist movements and chart their ideological and political direction.”⁶⁶ Rather than situate race at the foundation of Pan-Africanism, therefore, Rodney urged the forging of ties “with *particular* progressive governments, with *particular* liberation movements, and with *particular* social organization...”⁶⁷ (emphasis in original). By emphasizing the “particular,” Rodney deconstructs race, intimating that beneath the appearance of racial identity and solidarity that the nationalist school projected lay complex and ambivalent socio-economic imbalances. Rodney’s “particularity” situated an anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist (i.e., class) focus in place of the racial paradigm that traditionally propelled Pan-Africanism. At the Sixth Pan-African Congress in 1974 in Tanzania, Rodney objected to the continued use of race as a rallying force, and offered class as an alternative paradigm, strongly imploring the delegates to deal seriously with the growing class contradictions in Africa and among blacks in diaspora. As he declared, “the goal of African people’s unity is by no means inconsistent with a policy of *drawing a line of steel against African enemies of the people and with seeking the closest working relations with non-African peoples*, to the extent that the latter are engaged in the fight against exploitation”⁶⁸ (emphasis mine).

Confronting and dislodging the indigenous lackeys of neo-colonialism, however, required a coalition of the GI, who is knowledgeable on the character, essence, and machinations of neo-colonialism, and the masses who, in spite of their impoverished state, embodied culture and history in their original forms. Left alone, the GI was incapable of undertaking the gigantic task of liberating his society from exploitation and poverty, particularly at a time when the problem had become much too complex. What was needed was a union of some sort between the GI and the black masses. In other words, the GI had to bridge the gap separating him from the exploited masses, by going to them and grounding with them, and sharing of their experiences. This grounding would result in a dual process of exchange of valuable experiential lessons. The GI would learn from the masses, getting to know them better, and appreciate their needs

and interests; while they in turn would benefit from the GI's knowledge of historical issues and critical perspective, especially perspectives pertaining to the nature and character of capitalism and neo-colonialism. The scenario is one of solidarity between the GI and the people against ruling class domination and exploitation.

Rodney himself set the example. As his strategy shifted from intellectual exercises to a more activist confrontation with neo-colonialism, he decided that the ideal place for him was among his native Guyanese. In 1974, he returned to Guyana to assume the position of professor and chair of the History Department at the University of Guyana. Rodney left Tanzania against the pleas of his revolutionary and progressive African colleagues. On the surface, this move suggests the ascendance of Rodney's West Indian nationalism. But he flatly denied this, insisting that the decision was informed by a more practical consideration. In any environment, he averred, indigenous intellectuals were better equipped, culturally, to ground with their own people. Despite his knowledge of African history and proficiency in Swahili, Rodney felt ill-equipped to ground effectively with native Tanzanians. Being West Indian, he had no choice but to return to a terrain where he felt best suited to function.⁶⁹ Rodney's action should, however, not have surprised anyone. After all, he clearly hinted earlier that his objective in going to Africa was to sharpen his knowledge and understanding of Africa in order to serve, more effectively, the cause of liberation in the West Indies. In other words, he was drawn to Africa by the need to gain experience within Africa, and to acquire the type of practical knowledge of Africa that would facilitate his work in the West Indies.⁷⁰ This cultural domestication of the role of the GI reflects yet another of Rodney's debts to Cabral. The quintessential GI, Cabral has been described by a leading Africanist as "a supreme educator in the widest sense of the word."⁷¹ He theorized extensively on the character and *modus operandi* of imperialism in Africa. Beyond that, however, he set the example by living his life in strict conformity with his ideas. Although a petty bourgeoisie himself, Cabral committed class suicide by grounding with the masses of his native Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde, and committing his intellectual resources to the cause of their liberation. He refused to compromise with Portuguese imperialism, believing strongly that only armed confrontation would dislodge the imperialists from his native land. As the leader of "Partido Africano da Independencia da Guine e Cabo Verde" (PAIGC), Cabral adopted armed confrontation as the effective weapon of freeing his people from Portuguese colonialism. This confrontation ended with his assassination by agents of Portuguese fascism in 1973.⁷² According to Edward Alpers, "Cabral specifically refused to tell other revolutionaries how to make

their own revolution, although he left no doubt that it was up to them to make it within the historical context of their own societies."⁷³

Rodney's analysis suggests two prototypes of the GI. The first, which he exemplified, is the more moderate GI whose activities are confined to grounding with the masses and subverting the system of oppression from within, adopting every available means short of violence. The second is the Guevaran/Cabralian model, the one who not only commits class suicide by grounding with the people, but violently engages the power structure. Both Cabral and Che Guevara were revolutionary intellectuals who took up arms in furtherance of the national liberation of their peoples. Rodney had tremendous respect for Cabral and others who embraced armed struggle. As he declared, "I have the greatest respect for those intellectuals who have taken up the gun."⁷⁴ Although Rodney avoided armed confrontation, his strategy was no less courageous. He eventually suffered a similar fate.

Rodney's return to Guyana was his final act in the commission of class suicide. No sooner had he returned to Guyana than it became clear to the government of Prime Minister Forbes Burnham that Rodney was not going to confine his activities to the university, but that he was determined to become more politically engaged, particularly in the task of raising the social consciousness of the masses. The government quickly revoked his teaching appointment.⁷⁵ Sensing the dangers ahead, several of Rodney's close friends urged him to consider teaching opportunities in the United States and Britain. But this was no option for Rodney. As a GI, he chose to remain in Guyana, in proximity to the people to whose cause he had pledged his life. He became more actively involved in organizing and running the Working People's Alliance (WPA). Along with revolutionary activists like Clive Thomas, Eusi Kwayana, Josh Ramsammy, Moses Baghwan, and Malcolm Rodriguez, Rodney began to lecture, organize and mobilize the masses, exposing the corrupt and exploitative nature of government policies. They also succeeded in exposing the shallow and dubious character of the socialist and populist pretensions of Burnham and his People's National Congress (PNC).⁷⁶ The growing popularity of the WPA posed a threat to the government. On numerous occasions, Rodney and his comrades in the WPA were intimidated, arrested, and incarcerated. They were, however, too determined and committed to the people's struggle to be deterred. If Rodney was not mobilizing rice growers on the East coast, he was at Linden organizing the Bauxite workers.⁷⁷ Government propaganda began to lose its steam as the masses, conscientized and mobilized, began to flock to WPA rallies. Rodney's activities were however becoming too threatening to, and subversive of, governmental programs to be ignored. On the 13th of June

1980, Rodney died as a result of injuries sustained from the explosion of a two-way radio that had been given to him by one Gregory Smith, later identified as “a government plant.”⁷⁸

Contrary to the insinuations of some observers following his assassination, Rodney did not openly seek martyrdom. He never embraced violence, his uncompromising opposition to government policies notwithstanding. According to Clive Thomas, a close comrade in the WPA, “Rodney was no martyr, and in fact recognized that whatever else it represented, martyrdom is a self-defeating political act. He, therefore, did not court his death.... He prized being alive as necessary to continuing political struggle.”⁷⁹ Rodney himself acknowledged the “severe limitations” of violent confrontation.⁸⁰ As he noted, “it is not everybody who will become a Che Guevara. That kind of image could even become destructive.”⁸¹ He defined the task of the GI as primarily “to operate within the aegis of the institution and the structure and to take from it and to transform it over time.”⁸²

Conclusion

Rodney’s recognition of the role of education in the sustenance of colonial and post-colonial structures of domination led him to devote his entire life, scholarship, and struggle to articulating, and forcefully propagating, a combative, revolutionary epistemology—one that was capable, in his judgement, of reversing the debilitating impact of Eurocentric historiography on black consciousness, and loosening the death grips of the Europeans on the political economy of African and black diaspora societies. His counter revolutionary epistemology entailed the mergence of theory and praxis—the revolutionary intellectuals must transcend intellectual theorizing and posturing. Rodney thrust two fundamental responsibilities on such intellectuals. First, to serve as agents of propagating revolutionary, counter-establishment cultural values, and consciousness among the masses. Second, to position themselves in the vanguard of the struggle to free the people from European exploitation and hegemony. His writings and activities clearly mapped out, and demarcated, these two fundamental levels of engagement for the revolutionary intellectuals. A central theme of his revolutionary epistemology, therefore, is the transformation of the revolutionary theoretician into a revolutionary activist. Rodney’s career manifested this transformation. He consequently lived the experience he wrote and theorized about, grounding with the brothers and sisters in the dark alleys and shanty towns of Jamaica and Guyana. Refusing to be shackled and hamstrung by considerations of his petit bourgeois class and train-

ing, Rodney transcended his class, becoming a potent weapon against, and a threat to, the very class that would have afforded him comfort and shielded him from the ugly and painful experiences of the common people. As George Lamming aptly surmised, “he (i.e., Rodney) lived to survive the distortions of his training and the crippling and ambivalence of his class.”⁸³

Although Rodney did not openly court martyrdom, he boldly confronted the challenges of his peoples struggles without consideration for his personal security and comfort. In other words, he shunned “the not inconsiderable security and comforts that go with the careers of the cosmopolitan intelligentsia, that new international aristocracy of (intellectual) labor” (his own class by training).⁸⁴ In fact, had he taken these into consideration, as many black intellectuals are wont to, Rodney would most certainly be alive today. Such considerations, however, featured less in his thought; for, in the sufferings and struggles of the ordinary people, Rodney saw the very circumstances that made him what he was. Consequently, nothing short of a total commitment to ending that struggle and suffering satisfied him. For this, he was willing to give up anything, including his life. Besides the struggle that defined, shaped, and ultimately took his life, Rodney left behind a rich intellectual legacy. No discussion of the Atlantic slave trade, European imperialism/colonialism in Africa, and the crises of development and underdevelopment in Africa, is complete without considerations of his contributions. His last book, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905*, was published posthumously. In it, he highlights the materialist and other complex external forces that shaped working class history and experience in Guyana. Almost two decades after his death, scholars are still grappling with several of the theoretical issues underpinning his works. Rodney was indeed a rarity—an intellectual who insisted upon putting all his resources to the service of the people. An Afrocentrist to the core, Rodney rescued and rehabilitated African history and culture. Perhaps most significantly, he demonstrated that it is indeed necessary and possible to be both Afrocentric and scholarly. He took scholarship seriously, and the force of his scholarship was compelling, even if one disagrees with his Marxist orientation and methodology. Rodney established unambiguously that he was not just another black/African cultural jingoist.

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